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Current Practices in Teaching Literacy to K-5 English Learners

Russell Gersten, Ph.D. • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Highlights (short version)

- Definition of academic English
- Why academic English is important
- How academic English is different from oral conversation
- Components of academic English, including phonology, grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse
- Teacher support and professional development

Highlights (extended version)

- Big ideas underlying the Guide
- New research supports the relevance of the principles of the National Reading Panel for ELs
- Purpose of the Guide and how it was put together
- Benefits for ELs of using a core reading program and supplemental materials; developing academic language
- Recommended practices are applicable in a variety of types of programs that serve ELs
- Types of professional development that teachers and school administrators need to implement the recommended practices

Russell Gersten, Ph.D.

About the Interviewee

Russell Gersten is a nationally recognized expert in both quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation methodologies, with an emphasis on translating research into classroom practice. He is regularly consulted as an expert in the area of mathematics research, use of randomized trials in educational research, and the education of English learners. Gersten works with the Center on Instruction, one of the five content centers in the comprehensive center network. In 2002, Gersten received the Distinguished Special Education Researcher Award from the American Educational Research Association's Special Education Research Division. He has over 125 publications in scientific journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, the *American Educational Research Journal*, and *Exceptional Children*, and serves on 13 editorial boards, including some of the most prestigious journals in the field, such as *Reading Research Quarterly, Journal of Learning Disabilities, Exceptional Children,* and *Elementary School Journal*.

Full Transcript (short version)

I'm Russell Gersten. I'm the director of the Instructional Research Group—we're a small research institute in Long Beach, California—as well as a professor emeritus in the School of Education at University of Oregon.

The Practice Guide is different in a few important ways from other things that are available or have been written. Probably the two key things about this were that we are trying to be practical, but also be very focused. Our charge was coherence, was not to just list 11 things or various research traditions, but to actually give guidance—specific guidance—and be clear about how confident we are in it.

There really are two or three big ideas that underlie the suggestions, and I will say this: we weren't aware at the beginning. We didn't say, "what are our three big ideas," but these are the ones that kept coming up as we reviewed the research, looked, got different perspectives on it. Number one is that English learners *can* learn to how to read in English at about the same rate as native speakers. This was not known five or ten years ago. This has been replicated, repeated time and time again; that is very important for people to know and to use as a foundation in policy. So that's one part—that we can and should teach kids how to read and not have lower standards or expectations for English learners.

Second *big* idea is the whole idea that English language development needs to be improved, and now we have some direction for how to improve it. And the reason the language development is so important is for kids—we know they can learn how to read in first, second grade—they can read accurately, and this kind of thing—but to build the kind of comprehension that we want, you have to start in kindergarten, or hopefully pre-K, with the development of academic English. Those are the two big ideas, and that's what we hope will give this document coherence.

I'm just gonna give you a brief overview of the recommended practices that are of course detailed in the practice guide, and a little bit of the reasoning. We really think the screening and progress

monitoring is essential because unlike five to ten years ago, English learners can now be included in and are included in the annual assessments in grades three through eight and high school. But this is a way for kids to be included in all the assessments that are done in a school and to make sure that kids are making adequate reading progress, even in kindergarten and first grade, where we can track whether they are learning how to read.

The second recommended practice is, there have been several high-quality studies about reading interventions that work for teaching kids to basically learn how to read. These are kids again who are really struggling, be they first graders or fourth graders, with just the rudiments of learning how to read for a variety of reasons. So we do have some powerful packages. The What Works Clearinghouse describes them. So that's another practice.

Third one is the whole importance of richer vocabulary instruction than most conventional reading books have, is critical. It's a life or death issue for these kids. And there are resources that people can use, and we've used successfully in our own research. There are some books—and these are just examples, I don't want to recommend them—like *Bring Words to Life* or *The Vocabulary Book* that can be used as a basis for improving vocabulary instruction. And having teachers understand why one needs to go beyond what in the typical reading text or what's even in supplements.

The whole other idea of systematically teaching academic language, teaching it a lot, using writing whenever possible, using the academic content the kids are learning, the stories they are reading, the science material they're reading.

The last practice we recommend—because there is increasing research supporting it—is the importance of kids working with peers, and with a structured procedure, this can be done as early as kindergarten, working in groups of either two or four, but where they know what to do. They have little tip sheets and little guides.

What's hugely important about this is—any of us—like when I've gone into rooms with a lot of English learners, especially when kids are maybe in many cases making the transition from Spanish language instruction to English language instruction, they tend to talk in a very low voice; they're very afraid of making mistakes. They're in a class of 30 in the fourth grade. If you do this with a peer, there's not the same anxiety. Let's say tense agreement is off, and your buddy corrects you; it is not a major kind of thing like being afraid the teacher is going to correct you in front of 25 kids. So those are our five key practices we recommend.

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Second *big* idea is the whole idea that English language development needs to be improved, and now we have some direction for how to improve it. And the reason the language development is so important is for kids—we know they can learn how to read in first, second grade—they can read accurately, and this kind of thing—but to build the kind of comprehension that we want, you have to start in kindergarten, or hopefully pre-K, with development of academic English. Those are the two big ideas, and that's what we hope will give this document coherence.

There's been this kind of a minor, but really important revolution. About even ten years ago, we tried to do a search for all the research we could find on this topic—and this was kindergarten to high school—and in terms of studies with any degree of rigor, we found a total of four studies on any topic: reading, math, science, language development. In the last five or six or seven years, there's been an explosion of studies. It's certainly not hundreds and hundreds, but we were able to find really strong evidence in a couple of areas. Strongest evidence probably is in the area of the validity of the screening measures. There's over a dozen studies that show that these measures predict how well kids are going to learn how to read. The various phonological measures, alphabet knowledge measures, and basically understanding of beginning phonics skills—those measures—are great predictors and reading in kindergarten, first grade, and by second grade reading fluency, is an excellent predictor.

Tied in with that, and this again has been replicated a dozen times, is that kids' scores on the English Language Proficiency Measure, which is mainly an oral language measure, has zero predictive validity for how quickly or slowly a child will learn how to read. In other words, you can look at their scores on these various language assessments, like Language Assessment Scales, or you can flip a coin and you'd be equally likely to figure out who's gonna quickly learn how to read and who gonna need support. So that's important for people to know. We were told and taught the opposite 10 years ago, 20 years ago. So that's one area of strong support. The other two areas are the interventions for kids learning how to read—these packages that are put together that are very similar to those for native speakers—work very well for English learners. And there's outcomes and comprehension—all kinds of areas. The What Works Clearinghouse considers many potentially positive, which is a pretty good judgment. And so there are things out there that can and should be used for interventions for these students, and they're easily available, and teachers don't need radical retraining to do these.

Third area is, that when peers work together—and this is usually several times a week, having clear formats for what to do in terms of practice, as opposed to giving kids long blocks of independent seat work—you get nice, significant growth in all kinds of areas of reading, language, vocabulary. So that's something to seriously consider where I'd say there's decent evidence. And the last area where there's some evidence is vocabulary. The kind of vocabulary methods that have been in the research for a long time do produce gains in English learners.

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One question that I've been asked a lot when I present is, "How relevant is a national reading panel for English learners?" And at the time of that report they used very little, if any, research on English learners. And it seems that most of the principles are applicable. There are a few things that need adjustments. Let me give you one example just from my own observational work in first grade. There was a girl, very—you know, dedicated student—she was doing very well, who came across the word "can." Like "I can climb up the mountain." I asked her what it meant. She had no idea, because that's exactly the academic language. It's not concrete. She knew what "mountain" was. There were pictures of mountains. That what teachers in first grade and in kindergarten need to do is to take that extra bit of time, and not make assumptions that kids are gonna know these words, and to quickly cover words. So that's one of the adjustments. For a word like "can," to spend time teaching that, which is where your solid English language development comes in, but even a word like "messy" the students may not know. It may be a little bit out of vogue and used more in the books they read. So, spending a minute or two, having pictures available that just show kids what "messy" is. But generally the principles hold.

The Practice Guide is different in a few important ways from other things that are available or have been written. Probably the two key things about this were that we are trying to be practical, but also be very focused. Our charge was coherence, was not to just list 11 things or various research traditions, but to actually give guidance—specific guidance—and be clear about how confident we are in it.

The standards we use were worked out in collaboration with IES—the Institute for Education Sciences—and they developed a set of initial criteria. We played around with them, in terms of how they fit the assertions. Whenever possible we used the same standards as the What Works Clearinghouse, but rather than talking about product, we were interested in ideas that cut across these various programs and products that are evaluated. So we also wanted to fill in holes and help people think about how to improve reading achievement for this group of kids.

"Implementation Strategies"

My thinking about what reading series to use for English learners is to use the core series, with the kind of supplements that more and more are appearing, with the various series. There are huge advantages to that. Kids could then get basically exposure to the same academic content as the law entails, and it's really a way to ramp up achievement. And the amount of support should be appreciable, in terms of ELD support. I think when one looks at materials that supplement a program, one of the key things you want to look for, though, is make sure that—they'll obviously be linked to some extent with the stories the kids are reading—they systematically help kids develop academic language. And it's pretty easy to do, because you want some time devoted to grammar, and that kind of stuff, and I think the earlier supplements often skip that, but that's important. But I would say with that, you'd be fine with the core series, and have that advantage of kids being, feeling part of the school, part of the third grade, and that kind of thing, and learning the same concepts.

In terms of bilingual programs, one thing we all know: there are so many different types, and often within the same district and with the same name there are so many different things that are called

bilingual programs. In the last, I'd say five, six years, the whole idea of dual immersion or basically programs where kids learn in both English and Spanish, and often the kids are mixed English speakers and Latino kids, there are more and more classrooms like that. And I think anyone could easily see the relevance for what we have in the practice guide for those situations. For the programs that use the model where most academic instruction—at least the first several years of school—are in Spanish, the key message and the key relevant parts would be the English language development part, you know, keeping that in mind in terms of ways to improve English language development.

I think for schools or districts where there's a small English learner population, the practice guide can really be useful in terms of: what are the kinds of things we need in place in this school? It might not be that every teacher can be an expert in all these areas, but the resources of a school—things can be combined. The ESL specialist can do work. Things can be combined between second and third grade. Peer activities could be used. So I think we provide an array of ideas that can be used, and the kind of professional development needs that would help.

If ESL specialists or teachers look at the practice guide, they'll see a lot that should resonate with their training. The value of building academic English and building knowledge of language structures, I think ideally, it would, in my view, if the ESL specialist could use and teach, and often in a small, more intensive way, especially the kids who are lower in proficiency, those kind of support lessons, that would be ideal. So they're linking it to what the child is doing in her regular class, but they're doing it with this real knowledge and training they have in language development.

In terms of the kind of professional development teachers need, I'm going to start with something that I think is really important that cuts across all the areas. The areas are going to be the same five areas that we stressed throughout the guide. And obviously the amount of training you would need to deliver the screening measures is much less than to become a good teacher of academic English or vocabulary. But, given that, what we've been doing research on in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Fairfax County is teacher study groups as a way to do professional development and get away from the workshops with sometimes a hundred people there, with the lectures, and then the kind of little bits of hands-on material that don't link to your own classroom, and basically the idea of reading articles, discussing them, and then right away seeing how they apply to the reading series or program you're using in your school. I think it's an excellent way to go, and also to the specific issues that come up with English learners. So I think that doing that in grade-level teams or some format is an excellent approach. In terms of the topics, the whole idea of academic English in English language development and vocabulary are the key ones that people are going to need extensive professional development on, and not necessarily "one size fits all."

As we all know, there are literacy coaches throughout the country, and my sense is they, too, very often need professional development in these areas—the vocabulary/academic language. But the benefits—not just for them, but for the teachers they work with—could be huge, because then if they go in and do a model lesson or observe or co-teach or give the teachers some feedback, they'd have a sense of how to embed this kind of material into their lessons, and they can even do little video kinds of things that all the teachers can watch and practice. So, I think using coaches to accomplish this goal is nice two-pronged approach.

The other area for professional development is for principals, or assistant principals in your larger schools. When they come and observe and do evaluations or make decisions about directions for school or what they emphasize, it's important for them to see, and for it to become second nature for them, that vocabulary development, development of academic language, having some peer interactive work going on at least a few times a week—those are critical. So, they don't necessarily have to be able to teach K-5 this way, but to be able to prioritize that for teachers to understand this is a way to raise achievement in literacy because the vocabulary and the language builds comprehension. So I think they need some orientation and training in this as well.